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ABSTRACT

This study examined the portrayal of women over the age of 50 on television, analyzed the demographics of older female television characters and compared them with their real-life counterparts, and examined the social message presented by the characters and programs. Analyses of data gathered from prime time network entertainment programs featuring older female characters indicated that, although older women are more positively portrayed than they were 20 years ago, the television characters are just as unrealistic as the negative portrayals were. The older women characters appear more glamorous than their real life counterparts, often look extremely youthful for their age, and do not face as many of the problems that their real life counterparts do. As is the case with race portrayals, television often ignores the realities of situations, and thus, women are not depicted dealing with such real life issues as age discrimination, aging parents, and economic self-sufficiency. In order to portray aging more realistically, television networks must hire more producers and writers who are themselves older and who can write from their own life experiences, or who can develop links with older persons so that their stories can be told. The broadcast industry should also reach out to advocacy groups for older women in an effort to make portrayals more realistic, and older viewers should let their opinions be known through letters to the networks. (EW)

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Prime Time Women

An Analysis of Older Women On Entertainment Television

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National Commission on Working Women
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1325 G Street N.W., Lower Level, Washington, D.C. 20005

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PRIME TIME WOMEN

An Analysis of Older Women on Entertainment Television

Written by Sally Steenland

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ABOUT THE COMMISSION:

The National Commission on Working Women is a nonprofit advocacy organization for women in nonprofessional occupations. These women number 39 million workers, constituting 77% of the female work force. As their advocate, the Commission works in many areas to improve the economic status of these working women. Some of our major issues include fair wages, child care, education and training, and dignity in the workplace.

The Commission's board is composed of corporate and labor union leaders, congressional officials, educators, media representatives, women's advocacy leaders, and working women themselves. These sectors bring diverse experiences and various points of view to Commission deliberations, resulting in broad-based effective strategies.

Early in the Commission's history we selected the media as an area of prime concern. Research has documented the importance of television in society: It is a powerful shaper of our attitudes, behavior, and knowledge of the world. Research has also documented the treatment of women on television: Their portrayal tends to be stereotyped, narrow, and unrepresentative of the rich diversity of real women's lives. Because of the power of these accumulated images of women, the Commission has developed projects that increase the visibility and eradicate the stereotypes of women on television.

Beginning in 1979, our media projects have included the following activities:

* Sponsorship of the annual Women at Work Broadcast Awards competition which honors the nation's best television and radio programs about working women

* Publication of an annual critique of the fall TV season which analyzes the image of female characters on the new shows

* Creation of a national symposium for TV and radio producers, directors, and advocacy groups to discuss the status of women in the broadcasting industry

* Sponsorship of a 10-day museum exhibit of award-winning TV programs about working women and a concurrent seminar series

* Publication of a "viewer scorecard" to increase audience awareness of television's portrayal of women

* Publication of a report analyzing children and families on prime time entertainment television

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Introduction

Women over age 50 comprise one of the fastest growing segments of society. As the general population continues to age and as women continue to outlive men, the proportion of older women in the population will increase, so that in the next 25 years, it is estimated that women over 50 will constitute almost 20% of American society.

This demographic shift has powerful social consequences — for the work force, for the political process, and for the media. Millions of older women are either employed or are returning to work; they constitute a significant segment of the voting population; and they are part of a growing market of viewers and buyers who are attracting the attention of the television networks and advertisers.

Although women constitute the majority of older Americans, their economic condition and social status are often ignored. In the past few years the percentage of older people living in poverty has declined, so that the trend of recent news reports is to show that the majority of older Americans are comfortable economically and face a secure future. Senior citizens are now portrayed as a well-off group--one with pensions, health insurance, adequate Social Security, and the leisure time to spend their income on "luxuries."

While it is true that many women over age 50 are comfortably well off, it is also true that many women are not. In fact, older Americans are a diverse lot, not a monolithic group, and within their diversity lie striking differences. Older women, for example, tend to fare worse than older men do as they age. Their incomes are lower, they are half as likely as men to receive pensions, and they are more likely than men

to outlive their spouses, to live alone, and to end up poor. For women of color, the picture is even bleaker.

According to recent Census Bureau statistics:

* The median annual income for women in their 50s is less than $8,500. For women over 65, it is about $6,000.
* Thirteen percent of all women over 50 live below the poverty level.
* Only 20% of women over 65 receive any pension.
* The average age of widowhood is 56--too young to qualify for Social Security or Medicare.
* Women over 65 constitute 71% of the elderly poor and 80% of the elderly who live alone.

Not only is the economic status of older women lower than that of older men, their social status is diminished as well. American culture has been kind to men as they age, attributing wisdom, experience, and power to elderly males, while women have more often been labeled as unattractive, eccentric and silly.

These images have been reinforced by popular culture which has portrayed a succession of gray-haired men surrounded by much younger women. Traditionally missing from our mass imagination have been the images of appealing, attractive older women who make us view female aging as a positive process. With less physical appeal and virtually no economic clout, women over 50 have been powerless in society and invisible on television.

However, the picture has begun to change in recent years. As older women are growing in numbers, they are becoming a desirable market for advertisers and television networks. Indeed, as the entire population ages, television programmers are seeking to attract older viewers. Advertisers are also targeting commercials and advertising campaigns to this growing market. As a result, the characters on network television programs today look noticably different from a decade ago.

"Prime Time Women" examines the portrayal of older women on television. Specifically, it looks at the image of women over 50 on network entertainment programs. The report analyzes the demographics of older female TV characters and compares them to their real-life counterparts. It also examines the social messages presented by the characters and programs. In conclusion, the report discusses the significance of these portrayals for older women and society at large. "Prime Time Women" was funded by a generous grant from the Villers Foundation.

A Look at the Past

Twenty years ago, older women on television were virtually invisible. The number of regular female characters over age 50 could be counted on one hand: There was Aunt Bea on "The Andy Griffith Show" and Granny on "The Beverly Hillbillies"; but they were vastly outnumbered by the younger characters on shows such as "That Girl," "I Dream of Jeannie," "Bewitched," and "Get Smart."

Ten years ago, the picture had not improved. "Maude," Edith Bunker on "All In the Family," and Grandmother Walton on "The Waltons" replaced Aunt Bea and Granny, but they were outnumbered by "Phyllis," "Rhoda," "The Bionic Women," "Charlie's Angels," and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

In the past two decades, research studies have documented the dearth of both older men and women on TV. For example, although people over age 65 constituted 11% of the population in the real world during the late 1970s, they comprised only 2% of all television characters. Within that underrepresentation, women were particularly invisible -- 91% of all older characters were male, while only 9% were female.

In general, women on TV 10 years ago were outnumbered by men three to one. The vast majority of these women were young. Most female characters were in their 20s or early 30s, about 10 years younger than their male counterparts. In fact, an employment survey conducted by the Screen Actors Guild in the late 70s found a positive correlation between increasing unemployment rates for actresses as they aged and the lack of older female characters on the screen.

Those older women who were seen on television in any role were not cast in a particularly favorable light. Their characters tended to be powerless, befuddled, inflexible, and feeble. Scriptwriters gave them no opportunities for romance, since older male characters were paired with younger females and older women appeared as sexless. Moreover, most were not treated with courtesy or respect by other characters. For older women characters who were minorities, the situation was most bleak, for they were invariably cast as pathetic victims.

Surprisingly, within the past five years, female characters on TV have begun to grow older. In fact, there is a new breed of women on the screen today that never existed before. They are between the ages of 35 and 50, significantly older than their TV counterparts in the past. Almost all are white and have professional jobs. Some are married, while others are not. These female characters constitute almost half of all women currently on TV.

Just as this new 35-50 year old sector has increased in number, so have women characters over age 50, who now account for 20% of all women on TV, up from 10% a decade ago. Of these older female characters, 23% are over age 65. It is this group over age 50 with which this report is especially concerned.

The Picture Today

If older women on TV 10 years ago were portrayed in a distortedly negative manner, the pendulum has now swung to the opposite extreme. Today's older female characters are powerful, creative, appealing and affluent.

The following sections of "Prime Time Women" examine older women on today's TV programs in detail. "On Their Own and Affluent" looks at their marital status and economic condition. "On the Job" examines their occupations. "Age is Irrelevant" analyzes the relationship of age to appearance and behavior, while "Living in a White World" looks at race. "Decent Housing and Companionship," the last section, examines older women's living conditions.

During the report's six-week monitoring period in the spring of 1986, there were 19 female characters over age 50 on 16 prime time entertainment programs. Following are the characters and their shows:

"The Colbys"	Connie Colby Patterson
"Dallas"	Miss Ellie Farlough
"Dynasty"	Alexis Colby
"Facts of Life"	Edna Garrett
"Falcon Crest"	Angela Channing
"Golden Girls"	Dorothy Zbornak
	Rose Nylund
	Blanche Devereaux
	Sophia Petrillo
"Hotel"	Victoria Cabot
"Knots Landing"	Lilimae Clements

"Murder, She Wrote"	Jessica Fletcher
"Night Court"	Selma Hacker
"Punky Brewster"	Mrs. Johnson
"Remington Steele"	Mildred Krebs
"Scarecrow and Mrs. King"	Dotty West
"Simon and Simon"	Cecilia Simon
"227"	Pearl Shay
"Who's the Boss"	Mona Robinson

Their age, marital and economic status, occupational, and race characteristics are as follows:

Age: Seventy-eight percent of these older female characters are between 50 and 65 years old; 17% are between 65 and 80, and one character is over 80. Female characters over age 50 constitute approximately 20% of women on TV. In reality, women over 50 account for 38% of all adult women.

Marital Status: Sixty-eight percent of older female characters are widows, while 16% are divorced. Only one older female character remained married throughout the monitoring period. In reality, more than half of all women over 50 (53%) are married, while 6% are divorced, and 32% are widows.

Economic Status: Twenty-six percent of older female characters are millionaires; 68% are middle class; 5% are working class. None are poor. In reality, only .2% of all women over 50 have annual incomes above $75,000; only 11% have incomes above $20,000. Almost 40% of all older women have incomes less than $5,000 a year, while 13% live in poverty.

Occupational Status: Fifty-seven percent of older female characters are in the work force. Twenty-one percent own their own businesses, 75% of which are multi-million dollar corporations. Eighty-two percent of the characters who work are in managerial or professional jobs, while the remaining characters who work are in clerical and service occupations. Forty-two percent of older female characters are not in the labor force; they are homemakers, volunteers, retirees, or wealthy women of leisure. In reality, 48% of women between 50-65 are in the work force. Only 23% are in professional or managerial jobs while 43% are in clerical or sales jobs. Twenty-percent are in service occupations and 14% work in blue collar jobs. Less than 2% of women of any age are corporate executives.

Race: Eighty-nine percent of older female characters are white. The remainder (11%) are Black. None are Hispanic or Asian. The reality for older women is similar; 89% are white, 9% are Black, and 2% are Hispanic and Asian.

On Their Own and Affluent

If painting a rosy picture is a crime, TV is guilty when it comes to older women. Never has life been so good for females over 50. They are healthy, attractive, affluent, and available for romance.

The economic status of older women on TV ranges from comfortably middle class to extremely wealthy. Although 68% of the characters are widowed and 16% are divorced, almost all have enough money to live relatively affluent life styles. Of all older women on television, none are poor and only Pearl on "227" is working class. Unlike the real world where 13% of older women live below the poverty level, TV's older women are both on their own and economically secure.

In fact, many are quite wealthy. On television, more than one in four women over age 50 are millionaires. Miss Ellie on "Dallas," the only woman on TV over 50 who stayed married throughout the past season, was an extremely wealthy widow before she married her current husband, Clayton Farlough. Together they live a life of luxury and ease.

Alexis Colby on "Dynasty" and Angela Channing on "Falcon Crest" are also millionaires. Although Alexis and Angela have inherited fortunes, both have increased their inheritances by shrewd business schemes. Unlike Miss Ellie who is gentle and nurturing, Alexis and Angela are powerful villains. Their power and wealth attract men, and both characters have been divorced, widowed and re-married several times during recent TV seasons.

Victoria Cabot on "Hotel" is another older woman millionaire. A widow, she owns and runs a luxury hotel in San Francisco. Neither a

villain nor a sex object, Victoria is an attractive aristocrat, a smart businesswoman, and an active socialite.

Connie Colby Patterson on "The Colbys" is the older sister of oil magnate Jason Colby. In her late 60s, she is a millionaire widow and the family matriarch, inspiring affection and loyalty from her relatives.

Several economic notches below the millionaires are the rest of TV's older women, who lead comfortable middle class lives with few financial worries. All of these characters are widowed, divorced, or single, and many are eager for romance.

Among the most popular older women currently on TV are the characters on "Golden Girls," four women who have been brought together by circumstance and have become good friends. They have pooled their finances and are living together, which permits a higher living standard than if each woman were on her own. Rose, Blanche and Dorothy are attractive and zesty, venturing at different speeds into a world of changed sexual mores and limited numbers of available men. Blanche is aggressive and vain, while Rose is conservative and lady-like. Several of the show's episodes have dealt with older women's sexuality, ex-husbands, and the stages of widowhood.

Jessica Fletcher, the star of "Murder, She Wrote," is an independent widow who has many friends and loves adventure. A well-known mystery writer, she is also an expert sleuth, solving crimes through her powers of deduction. Her success as an author enables her to live comfortably and travel frequently. Jessica also has

opportunities for romance, since men respond to her warmth, competence, and attractiveness.

The remaining middle class women on TV who are over 50 play supporting roles, in programs with younger leading characters. All of these older women are widowed, divorced or single, and most of them have paying jobs.

In "Remington Steele," Mildred Krebs is the competent assistant who's an essential part of the detective agency. Cecelia Simon on "Simon and Simon" is a socially active, upper middle class widow and mother of two sons who are private detectives. Dotty West on "Scarecrow and Mrs. King" is Amanda King's attractive widowed mother, who lives with Amanda and her sons, taking care of the children and the house while Amanda works secretly as a spy.

On "Who's the Boss," Mona Robinson is a sexy, widowed grandmother who's more flamboyant and youthful than her adult daughter. During the past TV season, Mona Robinson graduated from college and immediately got a job as a personnel counselor.

For four years on "Facts of Life," Edna Garrett was a housemother to teenagers in a boarding school. Recently, she bought a gourmet food store and became a small business owner. A widow, Edna Garrett is a somewhat dizzy, yet nurturing surrogate parent whose advice usually proves correct in the end. Unlike characters on other shows who seem to have no financial problems, Edna worried about her future when she was a housemother. Episodes of the show dealt with her low pay, her lack of a pension, and her financially insecure future. However, when

Edna's son bought a small store for her, her money problems were over, and she became its proprieter and a food caterer.

Despite the differences in their personalities, older women on TV are alike in many ways. They are physically attractive, they have trim, sometimes voluptuous bodies, and they are interested in men. Since every character except Miss Ellie is unmarried, opportunities for romance are relatively abundant for older female characters. Unlike the past, when TV's portrayal of older women was that of nonsexual creatures, today's older female characters wear negligees, kiss passionately, and have love affairs. If taboos about aging and sexuality exist in society, they have been erased from the world of television, where romance and passion do not diminish for women as they age.

On The Job

Most older women on TV are working women. Almost 60% of them have paying jobs. Of those female characters between ages 50 and 65, the percentage with jobs is almost 70%. In the real world, 48% of women 50 to 65 are in the labor force.

About two-fifths of older women on TV are not in the paid work force. Blanche on "Golden Girls" is a part-time volunteer at an art museum, while Lilimae on "Knots Landing" is unemployed, hoping to re-establish her career as a singer. Miss Ellie on "Dallas" lives a life of leisure, while Pearl on "227" is a 74-year-old apartment dweller who's the first to know the news on her block. Sophia on "Golden Girls" does not work outside the home--she is 80 years old and has had a stroke.

But just about everyone else has a job, in occupations ranging from grief counselor to oil tycoon. Unlike the real world where 63% of older women are clustered in clerical, sales, and service jobs, the majority of older women on TV work in professional occupations. In fact, 16% of them are the owners and chief executive officers of multi-million dollar corporations. On programs like "Dynasty," "Hotel," and "Falcon Crest," older women run oil companies, hotels, and wineries. Their offices are luxurious and their staffs number in the hundreds. Although all three characters handle their enormous power easily, only Victoria Cabot on "Hotel" is not a villain. Alexis Colby on "Dynasty" chooses to be ruthless and greedy. In one episode, she explained to another character, "All my life I've fought to make it in a man's world and I've played by their rules. Believe me, it is a

man's world because when a man is ruthless he's admired, but when a woman is ruthless, she's despised." Harboring grudges and vowing revenge, Alexis combines her personal and professional life into a blind quest for power and greater wealth.

Likewise, Angela Channing on "Falcon Crest" is a competitive, ruthless owner of a vineyard who jeopardizes her own daughter's life in an illegal business scheme. A shrewd businesswoman, Angela lives for her work, subsuming all interests into building her empire.

Although neither Angela nor Alexis are characters with many positive attributes, neither do they portray TV's past negative stereotype of an older woman. Both are respected and feared, are at the peak of their powers, and have enormous self-confidence. Unlike the real world, where women's value to society diminishes with age, these characters are in their prime.

These prime time soap operas are unusual in that they feature older women in major roles, with as much emphasis on the workplace as on the home. Other TV programs containing older women characters do not revolve as much around careers, but focus instead on interpersonal relationships. In addition, many of the older women characters on these other shows hold jobs more like those of women in the real world. For example, Dorothy on "Golden Girls" is a substitute teacher, while Selma Hacker on "Night Court" is a court matron. Mrs. Johnson on "Punky Brewster" is a registered nurse, and Mildred Krebs on "Remington Steele" is a secretary.

In the world of television, none of these older women experiences serious job problems because of her age. And judging from their

standards of living, all have incomes that are more than adequate. On an episode of "Night Court," Selma faces mandatory retirement because of her age, but treatment of such issues is rare. Age discrimination, unemployment, low pay -- all major issues for older women in the real world -- are virtually invisible on television. With few exceptions, the only barriers to the advancement of older women on TV are barriers that are personal, rather than societal.

Age Is Irrelevant

Of the 19 women on television over age 50, the vast majority are under 65 (74%). Only three characters are between 65 and 80 (16%); one is over 80 (5%). The remaining character, Angela Channing on "Falcon Crest" is probably over 65, but her actual age is shrouded in mystery, both on the show and in network publicity materials.

In fact, age is irrelevant for most of TV's older women. They are extremely youthful looking and as physically active and vibrant as younger women. Moreover, the television-created world holds just as many opportunities for older women as it does for females half their age.

On some programs, aging is explicitly denied as characters look and act younger than one would conventionally expect. For example, Mona, the grandmother on "Who's the Boss," has long hair and wears tight, revealing clothes. Many of her comments contain sexual innuendos, and she frequently behaves in a flirtatious manner, much to the chagrin of her daughter, Angela. Mona has had boyfriends in their early 20s, and in a recent episode, was competing with Angela for the same man.

On "Dynasty," Alexis Colby defies any limitations that might accompany aging. A powerful women over 50, she brings a worldly sophistication and savvy to her personal and professional relationships. She dresses in a seductive manner and is as alluring as younger characters. In recent episodes of the show, for example, Alexis' daughter, Amanda, fell in love with Dex, Alexis' most recent husband. But despite Amanda's youth and beauty, her attempts to win

Dex were futile and he remained in love with Alexis, only to be spurned for his brief involvement with Amanda.

Age brings the benefits of wisdom and experience for many of TV's female characters. Miss Ellie on "Dallas" is a trusted counselor to the show's younger women, "Hotel's" Victoria Cabot is a respected business executive, and Jessica Fletcher on "Murder, She Wrote" outwits allies and enemies alike with her creativity and thoroughness.

Jessica Fletcher is one of the strongest illustrations of an older woman on TV for whom age poses little handicap. Mentally and physically, she is in remarkable shape. On the opening credits of the program each week, Jessica is seen riding a bicycle, painting her house, fishing, and engaging in other physical activities which require agility and stamina. Her powers of acuity have not diminished with age, and her memory is excellent. One of her few concessions to age is the need to wear reading glasses. Although Jessica is a widow and lives alone, she is actively involved in an extended family of nieces, cousins, and other relatives and friends.

Unlike Alexis on "Dynasty" and Mona on "Who's the Boss," Jessica does not wear tight, sexy clothes nor behave in a seductive manner. Rather, she is a distinguished matron who has romantic opportunities with men her own age who are equally as dignified.

Only on "Golden Girls," is age not irrelevant. Blanche, Dorothy, and Rose acknowledge their mid-life status and speak from the vantage point of women over 50, revealing the inconveniences and surprises that aging brings. Some of the show's issues, like the marriage of adult children or the behavior of grandchildren, are relatively benign.

Other issues, like widowhood and death, are more weighty. Some issues, involving incontinence or menopause, border on the taboo.

"Golden Girls," in its frankness about aging, stands alone. On almost all other TV programs featuring older women, the characters over 50 are not much different from those under 50 -- all the ages blend together. Middle age has been extended, so that no one seems old.

Living in a White World

Out of a total of 16 programs with older women, only two shows contain minority women over age 50. Both of these characters are Black and are in minor roles. There are no leading Black female characters on TV over 50 and no Hispanic or Asian older women at all. Mrs. Johnson on "Punky Brewter" is a registered nurse who is the legal guardian of Punky's playmate Cherry. Pearl on "227" is a busybody neighbor who leans out of her window sill and exchanges gossip with other tenants sitting on the front stoop. Both Mrs. Johnson and Pearl are widows.

All of TV's older female characters in leading roles are white, and all of its Black female characters in leading roles are under 50. Dominique Devereaux, a wealthy women played by Diahann Carroll on Dynasty, is under 50, as are the leads in "227," "Charlie and Co.," "Gimme a Break," and "The Cosby Show."

Occasionally "The Cosby Show" features Cliff Huxtable's parents, a witty Black couple in their late 60s or early 70s who are devoted to their grandchildren and to each other. The elder Huxtables are model grandparents: They tell interesting stories about the old days, are loved and respected by their son, and adored by their grandchildren. They provide a sense of identity and continuity to Cliff's family, while leading independent lives of their own. Although other situation comedies feature families with grandparents, few are as positively portrayed as the grandparents on "The Cosby Show."

Decent Housing and Companionship

Over half of TV's older women live
friends. On "Golden Girls," four frie
on "Dallas," "Knots Landing," "Scarecr
shows, two or more generations live to
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Except for "Golden Girls" and "Mu
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In reality, about 25% of women ov
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older women, all other shows featuring women
n younger characters. On these shows there
ith no demarcation of women as they grow

of women over age 50 live alone; 70% live
lative. For women over 65, about 40% live
s of loneliness and financial insecurity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Television has come a long way over the past 20 years in its depiction of older women. Once invisible or distorted into negative stereotypes, older women on TV have emerged within the past five years as characters who are interesting and positively portrayed. Clearly, this is progress.

However, many of the current glamorous depictions of older women on television are just as unrealistic as the negative portrayals were a decade ago. Although many more programs now include female characters over 50, those characters bear scant resemblance to older women in the real world. They are less diverse than real women and grapple with few of the knotty challenges facing older women in today's society, such as age discrimination, aging parents, and economic self-sufficiency.

In addition, most older women on TV look extremely youthful, so that even though they are 10 to 20 years older than their television counterparts of the past, their physical portrayal denies their age. The realities of the aging process are still taboo on TV today. Not only are aging's negative social and economic consequences for women ignored, but the realities of the physical changes people experience as they age are invisible. Television is to be commended for including more older women in programs, but it has accomplished the increase largely by stretching the definition of young and middle-aged to new limits. In many cases, today's older women on TV are merely yesterday's ingenues portrayed by older actresses. Although such youthful-looking TV characters can be positive role models, they are

also unrealistic and should be balanced by female characters whose faces show more evidence of life's experiences.

Because American society is aging, the population of television viewers is older than it was 10 years ago. In its attempt to appeal to these viewers, most of whom are women, TV has put more older women on the screen, but most characters are raised in status to fit television's mold--that of the rich and powerful. For older women viewers, this is a mixed blessing. Never owning these attributes in the real world, it is in some ways a wonderful fantasy to see oneself in a world where one is powerful, valuable, attractive to men, and financially secure. But such a portrayal is just that, a fantasy, since the reality eludes most older women in today's society.

In its denial of the challenges and problems women face as they grow older, television treats age the same way it does race. On TV racial discrimination is nonexistent. Relations between races are positive, and all groups blend together into a harmonious whole. So too with age. Television portrays a world where there is no age discrimination, where a woman's value does not decline as she grows older, and where, through the fountain of youth scriptwriters provide, she is at the peak of her powers well into her 50s and beyond. Just as television shies away from the harsh realities of poverty and racial injustice, so too it ignores the indignities faced by older women. And in doing so, it misses opportunities for complex character development and powerful plots.

Some efforts to portray older women on TV both positively and realistically have been very successful. Two programs, which defied

the conventional wisdom of what makes a hit show, have become smashing successes. Both "Golden Girls" and "Murder, She Wrote" feature only older women in their casts with no regular male or younger characters for balance. And "Golden Girls" incorporates into its plots some of the real issues facing midlife and older women. Both shows, whose ratings put them in the year's top 10 programs, are immensely popular with viewers of all ages, and their success may spawn imitators, which would bring more older women to the screen.

But in order for television to hold onto older viewers, these new programs must bring greater reality into TV's fantasyland. Television should not ignore the real struggles of older women, for that is where courage, humor and heroism are to be found. There are millions of older women in American society whose diverse strengths and life experiences not only are entertaining but also have much to teach the rest of us about the next stages of our lives.

Growing old cannot be put off. Rich or poor, weak or strong, all of us grow older. Yet the process of aging is unknown and can be frightening. Here is where television should lead the way. It can illuminate the journey, with older characters who are captivating because they are authentic and with plots that are both gripping and funny.

In order to portray aging more realistically, television networks must hire more producers and writers who are themselves older and who can write from their own life experiences. TV writers and producers of all ages should develop close links with older friends and relatives so that their stories can be told. The broadcasting industry should also

consult advocacy groups for older women in order to develop more realistic characters and include important issues in plots and story lines. In addition to activities by broadcasters, older viewers themselves should write letters to the networks responding to characterizations of older people on television and suggesting themes they would like to see treated in program plots.

In some ways, the TV programs currently on the air are off to a promising start. Older women are finally visible on the screen and they have escaped society's stigma. Television's next challenge is to bring aging out of the closet. Reality must infiltrate the screen so that older female characters exhibit some of the scars and wisdom of five or six decades worth of living. Life's true adventures and challenges must be faced and conquered by these older women on TV, who could become our nation's next generation of heroes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this report, the Commission compiled and analyzed data gathered from prime time network entertainment programs featuring continuing female characters over age 50. We coded the following information for every continuing female character on each program monitored: age, race, occupation, marital and socio-economic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. The information was obtained from viewing program tapes and from interviewing network programmers and production company staffs.

Excluded from the monitoring sample were all of daytime programming and the following prime time programs: news, movies, sports, specials, and anthology programs.